

We work hard so you don't have to!

by Samantha Dingfelder

Hiking is already considered a strenuous activity and a good source of exercise, but it is suppose to be enjoyable too! Trail crews at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge labor all summer to improve the hiker's experience on the Refuge. Our trail crews provide maintenance from cutting dead and down trees to building bridges and cleaning up overgrown vegetation, so every hiker can see all the views the Refuge has to offer.

Scott Slavik, one of the Refuge's backcountry rangers for eighteen years, acts as the volunteer and trail coordinator for a High School Student Conservation Association (SCA) Program, Youth Conservation Corp (YCC) Program, and a seasonal Refuge trail crew.

Scott's energetic personality and work ethic has helped these trail crews complete seven trail projects this summer. Three major improvements include a new bridge on Fuller Lakes Trail, portages on the Swan Lake Canoe System, and major rerouting on Cottonwood Creek Trail. Other trail projects include maintenance of Doc Pollard Horse Trail, Emma Lake Trail, Moose Creek Trail, and Seven Lakes Trail.

As a seasonal outsider and hiker, I am personally grateful and impressed with the amount of work that is entailed with each project and how willing every crew member is to get the job done well and in a timely manner. There are less physical summer jobs most teenagers and college students could choose to make money during the summer, but these trail crew members knew the labor these projects entailed and still enjoyed the challenge.

Three weeks ago, I had an opportunity to help the seasonal trail crew for a couple of hours on the Cottonwood Creek Trail Project. Scott had offered to shuttle me across Skilak Lake on one my days off, so I could hike Cottonwood and when I arrived I was greeted by our seasonal and YCC trail crews. They helped me unload my gear from the boat and set up my tent for the night.

At 7:30 am the next morning I awoke to the hus-

tle and bustle of everyone getting ready for the day. I got dressed, packed a daypack, ate breakfast and headed up the trail. I had reached the top by noon but had mentally noted along the way all the things that needed to be cut or moved. Little did I know I would later be the one to help move them.

I hiked around the saddle for another two hours taking pictures and observing wildlife and on my way back ran into Dane Ketner and Jeremiah Marok, two backcountry trail crew members from Anchorage. They had just finished a lunch break and were loading up their gear to head back down. I wanted to help them, after all they had given me a free shuttle and helped me with my gear plus I was curious to know exactly what trail maintenance included.

To sum it all up "trail maintenance" according to me means "one who is high spirited with good knees and feels the need to practically run down the mountain while holding a chainsaw, 12-gauge shotgun, and a heavy daypack all the while bushwhacking and clearing the trail of alders and Devil's Club." Needless to say it was exhilarating and fun but definitely tiring. Never underestimate the power of manual labor!

If I have the opportunity to return next summer to the Refuge, I would enjoy branching out to work for the trail crew or biology program. After my brief experience with the trail crew, I appreciate the trails I hike on the Refuge. Not only do I value the nature that surrounds me but the path and effort it took to get me to my vista.

Samantha Dingfelder, 22, is currently in her senior year of undergraduate studies in the field of Wildlife Biology and Geology at Northwest Missouri State University. This is her first SCA internship. She hopes to pursue her career with U.S. Fish and Wildlife or other federal government conservation organization. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.